**BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA**   
Horace Miner

From Horace Miner, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." Reproduced by permission of the American Anthropological Association from The American Anthropologist, vol. 58 (1956), pp. 503-507.

*Most cultures exhibit a particular configuration or style. A single value or pat-*   
*tern of perceiving the world often leaves its stamp on several institutions in the*   
*society. Examples are "machismo" in Spanish-influenced cultures, "face" in*   
*Japanese culture, and "pollution by females" in some highland New Guinea*   
*cultures. Here Horace Miner demonstrates that "attitudes about the body"*   
*have a pervasive influence on many institutions in Nacireman society.*

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe.  This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock.  In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

    Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture   
of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Creel the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east....

    Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which as evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion   
of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

    The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is   
to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the   
powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more   
powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to   
in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.  While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and   
secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

   The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts.  However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

   The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charmbox of the household shrine. As these   
magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

   Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows   
his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution.   
The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to   
 make the liquid ritually pure.

    In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the   
 mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers   
 reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

   The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

    In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners   
 have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man open the clients mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there age no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy--mouth-men year after year, despite the fact  that their teeth continue to decay.

    It is to be hoped that, when a thorough  study of the Nacirema is made, there will  be careful inquiry into the personality  structure of these people. One has but to  watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-  mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an  exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain  amount of sadism is involved. If this can be  established, a very interesting pattern  emerges, for most of the population shows  definite masochistic tendencies. It was to  these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily  body ritual which is performed only by  men. This part of the rite involves scraping  and lacerating the surface of the face with a  sharp instrument. Special women's rites are  performed only four times during each  lunar month, but what they lack in  frequency is made up in barbarity. As part  of this ceremony, women bake their heads  in small ovens for about an hour. The  theoretically interesting point is that what  seems to be a preponderantly masochistic  people have developed sadistic specialists.

    The medicine men have an imposing  temple, or l*atipso*, in every community of  any size. The more elaborate ceremonies  required to treat very sick patients can only  be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the thaumaturge  but a permanent group of vestal maidens  who move sedately about the temple  chambers in distinctive costume and head-  dress.

    The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that  it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of  the really sick natives who enter the temple The concept of culture  ever recover. Small children whose indoctrination is still incomplete have been  known to resist attempts to take them to  the temple because "that is where you go to  die." Despite this fact, sick adults are not  only willing but eager to undergo the  protracted ritual purification, if they can  afford to do so. No matter how ill the  supplicant or how grave the emergency, the  guardians of many temples will not admit a  client if he cannot give a rich gift to the  custodian. Even after one has gained admission and survived the ceremonies, the  guardians will not permit the neophyte to  leave until he makes still another gift.

    The supplicant entering the temple is  first stripped of all his or her clothes. In  everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure  of his body and its natural functions.  Bathing and excretory acts are performed  only in the secrecy of the household shrine,  where they are ritualized as part of the  body-rites. Psychological shock results  from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly  lost upon entry into the *latipso*. A man,  whose own wife has never seen him in an  excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked  and assisted by a vestal maiden while he  performs his natural functions into a sacred  vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is  necessitated by the fact that the excreta are  used by a diviner to ascertain the course  and nature of the client's sickness. Female  clients, on the other hand, find their naked  bodies are subjected to the scrutiny,  manipulation and prodding of the medicine  men.

    Few supplicants in the temple are well  enough to do anything but lie on their  hard  beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of  the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort  and torture. With ritual precision, the  vestals awaken their miserable charges each  dawn and roll them about on their beds of  pain while performing ablutions, in the  formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they  insert magic wands in the supplicant's  mouth or force him to eat substances which  are supposed to be healing. From time to  time the medicine men come to their clients  and jab magically treated needles into their  flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies  may not cure, and may even kill the  neophyte, in no way decreases the people's  faith in the medicine men.

    There remains one other kind of  practitioner, known as a "listener." This  witchdoctor has the power to exorcise the  devils that lodge in the heads of people who  have been bewitched. The Nacirema  believe that parents bewitch their own  children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while  teaching them the secret body rituals. The  counter-magic of the witchdoctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the "listener" all his troubles and  fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties  he can remember. The memory displayed  by the Nacirerna in these exorcism sessions  is truly remarkable. It is not uncommon for  the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt  upon being weaned as a babe, and a few  individuals even see their troubles going  back to the traumatic effects of their own  birth.

    In conclusion, mention must be made of  certain practices which have their base in  native esthetics but which depend upon the  pervasive aversion to the natural body and  its functions. There are ritual fasts to make  fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to  make thin people fat. Still other rites are  used to make women's breasts larger if they  are small, and smaller if they are large.  General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human   variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mamrnary development are so idolized that they make a   handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

    Reference has already been made to the   fact that excretory functions are ritualized,   routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Efforts are made to   avoid pregnancy by the use of magical   materials or by limiting intercourse to certain phases of the moon. Conception is   actually very infrequent. When pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition.  Parturition takes place in secret, without   friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not nurse their infants.

    Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a   magic-ridden people. It is hard to un-   derstand how they have managed to exist   so long under the burdens which they have   imposed upon themselves. But even such   exotic customs as these take on real   meaning when they are viewed with the insight provided by Malinowski when he   wrote:

    "Looking from far and above, from our  high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not   have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization."

References   
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